Perceived Authenticity and Place Attachment among Mountain Tourists: A Case Study Exploration in the Gaoligong Mountain in Southwest China

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In the context of the embodiment and humanistic turn in tourism research, exploring new pathways for mountain tourism development from the perspective of the relationship between tourists' perceived authenticity (PAY) and place attachment (PAT) is of great significance. This approach aims to strengthen the emotional connection between mountain tourism and target tourist groups, improving the quality of the mountain tourism experience. This study defines the relationship between PAY and PAT among mountain tourists, clarifies their measurement dimensions, and constructs a research model for PAY and PAT in mountain tourism. Taking Gaoligong Mountain as a case study site, it collected 297 valid responses through a questionnaire survey. Seven research hypotheses were tested by the using structural equation modeling (SEM). The results show that: (1) The results of the reliability and validity revealed that the division of PAY are objective authenticity (OA) and existential authenticity (EA), and PAT are place dependence (PD) and place identity (PI), corresponding to the particular scenario of mountain tourists; (2) OA significantly enhances both PD and PI, and PD positively influences PI; (3) Analyses of Mediating Effects reveal that neither OA nor EA affects PI through PD; (4) EA significantly affected PI but not PD. The research results reveal the underlying mechanisms and dynamics between the dimensions of PAY and PAT among mountain tourists. Therefore, this study suggests that local governments and business enterprises should strengthen the emotional connection between mountain tourism and tourists by focusing on five key areas: enhancing PAY, aiming at target segments, promoting PI, understanding tourist needs, and improving policies and planning. These efforts will contribute to the sustainable and high-quality development of mountain tourism.

Keywords: mountain tourism, perceived authenticity, place attachment, structural equation modeling, Gaoligong Mountain

INTRODUCTION

China is a mountainous country, with hills, mountains, and plateaus accounting for about 65 percent of its land area (Wei et al. 2014), making it the world's first mountainous country (Deng 2012). Yunnan is rich in mountain tourism resources, and the market is developing well. According to the China Mountain Tourism Development Trend Report (2021 Edition), since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, nationwide tourism travel has declined by 50%, but mountain outdoor tourism has increased by 163%. Notably, 80% of the mountain tourists have chosen to travel to the mountains in the west of China. Mountain tourism has shifted from a niche elite to a mass popularity development.

In the era of mass tourism, mountain tourism has become an important direction of tourism development. Tourism has long surpassed the era of "zouma guanhua" which literally means “to look at flowers while riding on horseback” era (Liu et al. 2018). The beauty of the landscape cannot withstand more than one trip, and tourism often ends with a one-time consumption (Yang et al. 2006). Therefore, people look forward to a new place, and more and more people begin to accept the mountain tourism series products. Since December 2019, the novel coronavirus pneumonia epidemic (COVID-19)has caused stagnation in many industries and significantly impacted people's mental well-being (Cai et al. 2021). Very negative impact on China's tourism industry and changing the consumer demand of tourists (Ming and Zhao 2020). Increasingly, tourists are becoming more concerned about health and safety issues, and many want to choose healthier ways of travelling (Tian and Ming 2020). This trend has prompted tourists to favor destinations and activities that offer clean air, natural environments and a low-density visitor experience. Mountain tourism has become an ideal choice for many tourists seeking healthier travel due to its natural landscapes, clean air and abundance of outdoor activities (He and Zhang, 2021). According to the Research Report on Tourists' Willingness to Travel after the Epidemic, 36% of tourists are interested in mountain tourism. Mountain tourism is developing in the direction of integration and diversification. In addition to the traditional demand for sightseeing and carding, the needs of tourists are also changing, with more and more people looking for deeper experiences through mountain tourism, such as personal growth, spiritual pleasure and physical and mental well-being (Chen et al. 2010). Therefore, mountain tourism's original ecological, healthy and prosperous form will be a high-end mode in the post-epidemic era. Tourism poverty alleviation, tourism health and wellness, rural tourism, and other emerging issues are closely related to mountain tourism in China (Chen et al. 2017).

Mountain tourism has received more and more attention from the industry and academia (Chen et al. 2010). Analyzed the research literature on mountain tourism in China, it is found that the research on mountain tourism in China has experienced a budding and fluctuating exploration stage, and it is still in the initial stage in general (Chen et al. 2017). In recent years, the existing research on mountain tourism has been more from the economics and management perspective to discuss the "physical" aspects of mountain tourism, such as resource development (Liu and Yan 2021; Wei et al. 2014), product development (Liu and He 2022; Zhou et al. 2017). Less research on the "psychological experience" of mountain tourists (Liu et al. 2024). Studying the psychology of mountain tourists can broaden the depth and breadth of existing research, understanding of tourists' motivations, needs and emotional responses, optimize the tourism experience, enhance management precision, and promote sustainable development (Tian and Ming 2020). PAY and PAT are mainly studied as independent variables, dependent variables, or mediating variables on tourist satisfaction, especially in tourist destinations, traditional cultural experiences, and tourist consumption behavior (Ding et al. 2015; Qian et al. 2010). Research on reveals that PAY and PAT possess several dimensions (Mlozi et al. 2012). Understanding the relationship between PAY and PAT can help identify key factors influencing tourist experience (Ram et al. 2016). "Authenticity" has become a cure for people psychological needs, When the internal dimensions of PAY are strengthened, tourists may be more inclined to choose that destination for multiple visits (Cao et al. 2017). Tourists' PAY can directly influence their emotional connection and attachment to a destination (Ramkissoon 2015; Shang et al. 2019). However, current research explores less the influence relationship between these dimensions internally, especially in the context of mountain tourism. Mountain tourism involves natural landscapes, cultural heritage and adventure activities (Guo 2006). Mountain destinations are often perceived as "pristine" or "pure" by

tourists. In contrast to other types of tourism, tourists not only "see the scenery", but often come into direct contact with the natural environment and local culture through activities such as hiking, climbing, and camping (Shi and Ming 2024). Mountain tourists often desire for adventure, exploration, and an interest in the natural environment (Tian and Ming 2021).Studying the relationship between PAY and PAT among mountain tourists is important for a deeper understanding of tourist psychology and behavior.

Based on the unique and experiential nature of mountain tourism destinations, this study explores the influential relationships and mechanisms within the dimensions of PAY and PAT of mountain tourists. It first clarifies the internal logical relationship between mountain tourists' PAY and PAT. Then, identifying the dimensional divisions of PAY and PAT for mountain tourists. Next, constructs a research model and measurement scale for PAY and PAT in mountain tourism. The collected scale data will be tested with SPSS software to guarantee the quality of the measurement relationship. The model of PAY and PAT and the structural equation model of mountain tourists will be constructed, and the model will be evaluated. Finally, explores the influencing factors and mechanisms between PAY and PAT in mountain tourism. It proposes strategies and measures to strengthen the emotional connection between mountain tourism destinations and target tourist groups, as well as optimal pathways for improving destination management and promoting the high-quality development of mountain tourism.

Understanding the psychological motivation and emotional mechanisms of mountain tourists through the relationship between PAY and PAT can enrich the theoretical and empirical research in the fields of PAY, PAT, mountain tourism, and tourism management. Yunnan is a large province of mountain tourism. This study provides decision-making references and bases for the rational utilization and development of mountain tourism in Yunnan, which is of great significance in accelerating the development and construction of mountain tourism in Yunnan Province. Gaoligong Mountain is a typical representative of mountain tourism, which can provide a reference for the sustainable development of other mountain parks.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Perceived Authenticity

The study of authenticity emerged during the cultural changes of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries , exploring the desire and quest for "real" experiences (Varga and Guignon 2023). With the development of tourism, the concept of authenticity was gradually introduced into tourism research as an essential framework for understanding tourist experiences and behaviors (Cohen 2007). Initially, authenticity was viewed as an objective characteristic, and research focused mainly on preserving cultural heritage and local characteristics, emphasizing the importance of maintaining the original state of culture and environment (Halewood and Hannam 2001). As research progressed, scholars viewed authenticity as a multi-layered concept, encompassing the "authenticity" of a destination, the subjective experience of tourists, and socio-cultural influences (Hidalgo and Hernández 2001; Scannell and Gifford 2010). In this context, studies have gradually developed objective, constructed, existential, and postmodern authenticity (Cao, et al. 2017). Kolar et al. proposed two dimensions of objective and existential authenticity, focusing on cultural and historical characteristics and tourists' subjective experiences (Kolar and Zabkar 2010). After that, Zhou et al. developed the model to emphasize the role of emotional and psychological responses (Zhou et al. 2013). As tourists' demand for natural and cultural experiences increases, authenticity in mountain tourism has become an essential factor of attraction (Ram, et al. 2016; Xiao et al. 2021). However, the perceived authenticity of mountain tourists has not been clearly defined, and combined with existing research on authenticity (Kolar and Zabkar 2010；Zhou et al. 2013). This study defines authenticity of mountain tourists as the tourists' perception of the degree of truthfulness of things and situations that they experience in the mountain environment, which is mainly developed through the dimensions of "objective authenticity" and "existential authenticity".

Place Attachment

The concept of place attachment (PAT) originates from human geography (Fried 1963). It is an individual's emotional connection to a particular place, including identification with and reliance on the

place and individual identity construction, often influenced by external environmental factors (Hidalgo and Hernández 2001; Scannell and Gifford 2010). Mountain tourism scenarios are influenced by a complex of natural and humanistic environments. The PAT of mountain tourists, there is no standardized criterion for its conceptual definition. This study defines the PAT of mountain tourists as their emotion and identification with a specific mountain region. PAT dimensions has been highly controversial in previous studies, including monism (Ram, et al. 2016), dichotomy (Kyle et al. 2005; Yuksel et al. 2010), ternary (Hidalgo and Hernández 2001； Scannell and Gifford 2010), and pluralism (Silva, et al. 2018). The main controversy in the delineation of these dimensions is the independence of definitions and interrelationships, whereas the natural and cultural characteristics of mountains make the relationship between tourists and destinations more complex. Mountain tourism includes activities like hiking, rock climbing, and bird watching. Tourists depend on the destination's functional value and often develop emotional identification with its cultural landscape, natural environment, and unique dynamics. This functional prominence and emotional identification make it unique to study PAT in mountain tourism. Compared with the dimensional division of pluralism, dualism which center on PI and PD (Kyle et al. 2005; Williams and Vaske 2003). Directly reflect tourists' dual emotional and functional needs for mountain tourist places. Hence, this study chooses dualism. PD refers to tourists' reliance on the functional values of mountain areas, PI refers to tourists' sense of identification with the culture, history and natural environment of mountain areas. Previous studies used scales to measure PAT dimensions and analyze differences among groups or individuals (Hammitt, et al. 2006; Kyle et al. 2005; Lalli 1992; Williams and Vaske 2003). Silva et al. linked mountain destination image dimensions (natural ecology, social prestige) to PAT dimensions (PI, PD) to understand mountain tourism's emotional and functional connections (Silva et al. 2018). Exploring PAT in mountain tourism is important in understanding tourist behavior, promoting sustainable tourism, optimizing resource management, enhancing destination branding, deepening cultural understanding, and improving tourist experiences. However, existing research lacks a systematic framework for mountain tourists' place attachment.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

The relationship between tourists' perceived authenticity (PAY) and place attachment (PAT) has been explored, but no academic consensus exists on this relationship. Some scholars view PAT as the independent variable and PAY as the antecedent variable (Yi et al. 2021). Authentic environmental features provide more reliable experiences and resources (Davis 2016; Gross and Brown 2008; Yi et al. 2021). PAY positively affects revisit intention, and emphasizes the importance of maintaining authenticity in the tourism experience (Zhou et al. 2022). PAY directly enhances tourists' PAT to the destination, or PAY significantly influences PAT through the mediation of other factors (loyalty, satisfaction) (Shang et al. 2019). PAY is a prerequisite for PAT (Ramkissoon 2015). On the contrary, another group of scholars argues that PAT views PAT as the dependent variable and authenticity as the independent variable, i.e., PAT is a prerequisite for authenticity (Ram et al. 2016). As tourists' needs and socio-environmental factors continue to change, later studies delved into exploring the dimensions. For example, Loureiro verified that the authenticity of the objective environment plays a crucial role in tourists' PAT (Loureiro 2019), and that objective authenticity (OA) promotes tourists' sense of identification with the destination, especially in terms of cultural and historical contextualization (Huyen and Thu 2023; Yi et al. 2021), and that the PI dimension of PAT is the strongest predictor of authenticity factors (Budruk et al. 2008). Jiang et al. verified that EA had a positive effect on PAT, PI, place influence and place social connection (Jiang et al. 2017). Shang et al. confirmed that perceived authenticity of slow tourism destinations leads to place attachment, using Forking Stream Town as the subject of their study (Shang et al. 2019).The growing popularity of mountain tourism destinations highlights the need to better preserve the authenticity of natural and cultural resources (Zhou et al. 2013). The uniqueness of mountain tourism lies in the unexploited natural landscapes and unique ethnic cultures (Gui et al. 2021). These elements may show a higher level of authenticity through OA, such as pristine natural landscapes, local traditions and customs, and cultural symbols that make tourists emotionally connected to these elements, and the deepening of this emotional connection may further enhance the tourists' PI (Xiao et al. 2021). In this regard, the following research hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 1a: *Objective authenticity has a positive effect on place dependence.*

Hypothesis 1b: *Objective authenticity has a positive effect on place identity.*

Hypothesis 1c: *Place dependence mediates between objective authenticity and place identity.*

Hypothesis 2a: *Existential authenticity has a positive effect on place dependence.*

Hypothesis 2b: *Existential authenticity has a positive effect on place identity.*

Hypothesis 2c: *Place dependence mediates between existential authenticity and place identity.*

Most of the current studies consider PAT as a separate independent or dependent variable or split out different dimensions to explore the direct influence, mediating effect of the destination or local culture on tourists' experience, as well as the unfolding exploration based on the relationship between the dimensions within PAT (Ramkissoon et al. 2013; Williams and Vaske 2003; Yuksel et al. 2010). Some scholars consider place dependence (PD) and place identity (PI) as parallel dimensions of PAT (Ramkissoon et al. 2013; Williams and Vaske 2003; Yuksel et al. 2010). While other scholars believe that PD and PI are independent of each other and have a mutual influence relationship (Smith et al. 2010). This perspective has led to two distinct viewpoints: (1) PI is predicted through PD (Moore and Graefe 1994), For example, Xiao et al. confirmed that place dependence has a positive effect on place identity through their study of Jiuzhaigou National Park in China (Xiao et al. 2021). (2) PI is a prerequisite for PD (Mlozi et al. 2012). Mlozi et al. (2012) explored this relationship by using international tourists in Tanzania as a case study (Mlozi et al. 2012). Their research demonstrated that place identity significantly influences place dependence, identifying key determinants of both factors. In this study, Gaoligong Mountain is used as the site for case study, where the pristine natural landscapes and ethnic cultures are very well protected, and most of the tourists aim at trekking and bird watching, emphasizing the authenticity of the natural landscapes, ecological environments, and cultural contents. Mountain tourism differs from pilgrimage and healing tourism which straightforwardly pursuit spiritual connection (Shi and Ming 2024), Tourists form an emotional connection by relying on the natural environment and cultural resources in trekking and bird-watching in Gaoligong Mountain, enhancing their sense of identity. This dependence is a functional demand for resources and gradually transforms into a sense of emotional belonging to the destination (Williams and Vaske 2003). Therefore, within the context of mountain tourism, this study considers PD and PI to be independent of each other. The hypothesized relationship between the two is as follows:

Hypothesis 3: *Place dependence has a positive effect on place identity.*

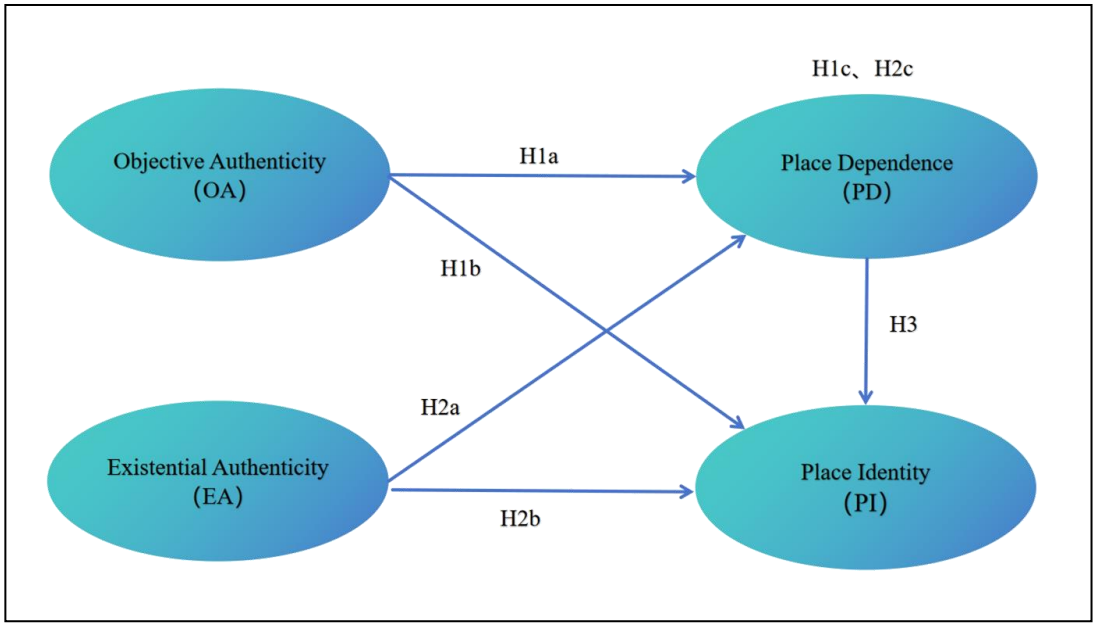

Figure 1. Conceptual model.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Site

This study chooses Gaoligong Mountain, located on the southwest border of China, as the sample site for the questionnaire survey, mainly due to the following unique advantages: (1) Unique natural and cultural resources. Gaoligong Mountain is a national nature reserve, a UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve, and an integral part of the Three Parallel Rivers World Natural Heritage Site. It is renowned as a "World Species Gene Bank" and a “Museum of Nature”. The area is inhabited by many ethnic groups, with rich ethnic cultures and historical relics, such as the Lisu and Nu ethnic groups and the Southern Silk Road (Bonan ancient road). In addition, Gaoligong Mountain is also a popular destination for trekking tourism, offering several trekking routes that attract a large number of tourists and provide abundant opportunities for fieldwork and data collection. (2) A model of authenticity and ecological conservation. Gaoligong Mountain has maintained a high degree of authenticity in its tourism development. The government and local communities prioritize ecological protection and the preservation of cultural heritage. Minimal commercialization allows visitors to experience the purest natural and cultural landscapes, which contributes to understanding the formation of PAT. (3) Diversified tourism experience. Gaoligong Mountain offers not only ecotourism experiences such as nature hiking and birdwatching but also deep interactions with local ethnic minority cultures, including participation in folk activities and demonstrations of traditional crafts. This diversity helps examine tourists' perceptions of the authenticity of the natural environment and the impact of cultural interactions on their sense of presence and connection. (4) A Representative case of mountain tourism. As a prominent mountain tourism destination in Yunnan Province, it combines unique features such as mountainous landscapes, ethnic minority cultures, and ecological conservation. These characteristics are shared by many other mountain tourism sites in China, making Gaoligong Mountain a valuable reference for guiding tourism development in similar destinations. (5) Dual academic and policy value. The uniqueness of Gaoligong Mountain makes it an ideal case for studying PAT and perceived authenticity, offering insights into the complex relationship between the two. This research can provide policy recommendations for the development of mountain tourism in Yunnan Province and other regions, particularly in promoting sustainable development, cultural preservation, and ecological conservation.

Measurement Scale

The respondents of this study were tourists who had visited Gaoligong Mountain, and the data were collected using a questionnaire containing several scales. The questionnaire was divided into two parts: (1) The first section uses a Likert five-point scale to measure tourists' perceptions of OA, presence authenticity, PD, and PI. The scales for PI and PD were adapted from Williams and Vaske (2003), while those for OA and presence authenticity were based on Kolar and Zabkar (2010) and Zhao, Marzuki, Rong, and Ran (2024). These scales were modified in consultation with experts in the field of tourism to better align with the characteristics of Gaoligong Mountain. The final scale consists of 14 items (Table 1), where "1" represents "Strongly Disagree," "2" represents "Disagree," "3" represents "Neutral," "4" represents "Agree," and "5" represents "Strongly Agree." (2) The second section focuses on demographic characteristics, collecting data on tourists' gender, age, education level, occupation, income, and number of visits. Although demographic characteristics are not analyzed as mediator, moderator, or control variables in this study, they play an important role in the questionnaire. By gathering this information, a more comprehensive description of the sample characteristics can be provided, enabling a better assessment of the research topic, identifying potential trends, and controlling for the influence of these variables, thus laying the foundation for future research.

TABLE 1
MEASUREMENT QUESTION ITEMS FOR PERCEIVED AUTHENTICITY AND PLACE ATTACHMENT IN MOUNTAIN TOURISTS

Variables	Serial number	Measurement term	Reference
Objective Authenticity	OA1	I like the landscape, flora and fauna, and ethnic culture of the Gaoligong Mountain and find it interesting.	(Kolar and Zabkar, 2010; Zhao, et al. 2024)
	OA2	I think the scenery, flora and fauna, and ethnic cultures of the Gaoligong Mountain are real.	
	OA3	I think the original form of the natural resources of the Gaoligong Mountain is well preserved.	
Existential Authenticity	EA1	During my travels, I try to find things I want to know about.	
	EA2	In my travels, I seek extraordinary or unusual experiences in pursuit of self-realization or self-fulfilment.	
	EA3	During my travels, I maintained natural, genuine, and friendly connections with family and friends, locals, and other fellow tourists.	
Place Identity	PI1	It means a lot to me to visit Gaoligong Mountain.	(Williams and Vaske, 2003)
	PI2	Gaoligong Mountain is an exceptional mountain destination for me.	
	PI3	I have great feelings for Gaoligong Mountain.	
	PI4	I strongly agree with Galigong Mountain as a mountain tourist destination.	

Place Dependence	PD1	Gaoligong Mountain is the best mountain tourist destination for hiking, bird-watching and other activities.	
	PD2	No other mountain park can be compared to Gaoligong Mountain.	
	PD3	I get more satisfaction at Gaoligong Mountain than when going to other mountain parks.	
	PD4	Traveling to Gaoligong Mountain is more important than traveling to other places.	

Data Collection and Research Sample

A pre-survey was conducted in May 2024, and the questionnaire was created through the "Questionnaire Star" online form tool platform. The questionnaire was distributed through targeted distribution and snowballing, and 74 valid questionnaires were collected. The analysis results showed that the questionnaire met the validation criteria, which led to the final version of the questionnaire. The formal research was conducted in July 2024, using the same data collection methods as the pre-study. A total of 321 questionnaires were received for this research. In the data cleaning process, questionnaires from respondents who had not visited Gaoligong Mountain, questionnaires that took less than 150 seconds to fill out, questionnaires with abnormal data, and questionnaires with contradictory answers were excluded. Finally, 297 valid questionnaires were obtained. The recovery rate of this research is 92.52%, and the sample size reaches 10 times the standard of 12 items, which is enough to support the in-depth exploration of the relationship between the variables in the model.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Descriptive Statistical Analysis

The sample characteristics showed significantly more male participants involved in mountain tourism than females. This may indicate that males are more interested in and involved in mountain tourism, which may be related to how active males are in outdoor activities. The 25-34 age group had the highest percentage of participants (47.80%), which suggests that young people in this age group have a greater demand for mountain tourism, which may be related to their lifestyles, financial ability and desire for new experiences. Participants with higher levels of education dominated, especially the higher proportion of college and bachelor's degree holders, suggesting that those with higher levels of education may be more inclined to participate in mountain tourism, possibly because they are more concerned with health, leisure and nature experiences. Civil servants and institutions have the highest percentage of participants, which may be related to this occupational group's stability and relatively high vacation time. It may also reflect the importance they place on leisure activities. The middle-income group (RMB5,000-8,000) accounted for the largest share of participants, indicating that tourists at this income level are more capable to afford mountain travel, which may be related to the affordability of travel spending. Most participants had visited Gaoligong Mountain at least once, indicating its attractiveness and tourism potential.

TABLE 2
DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF TOURISTS IN GAOLIGONG MOUNTAIN

Variable	Categories	Sample size	Percent age	Variable	Categories	Sample size	Percent age
Gender	Male	206	69.40%	Occupation	Student	25	8.40%
	Female	91	30.60%		Civil service / public institution	151	50.80%
Age	18-24 Years old	59	19.90%		Corporate Employee	66	22.20%
	25-34 Years old	142	47.80%		Freelancer	31	10.40%
	35-44 Years old	81	27.30%		Private business owner/self-employed	15	5.1
	45-54 Years old	5	1.70%		Farmer	9	3
	55 years and over	10	3.40%		Retiree	0	0
Educational level	Primary school and below	12	4%		Others	0	0
	Junior middle school	3	1%	Monthly income status	Less than 3,000 yuan	33	11.1
	Senior high school	4	1.30%		3000-5000 Yuan	20	6.7
	Junior college	117	39.40%		5000-8000 Yuan	130	43.8
	Undergraduate course	139	46.80%		8000-12000 Yuan	80	26.9
	Master's degree or above	22	7.40%		12000 Yuan and above	34	11.4
Number of visits to Gaoligong Mountain	Never been	0	0				
	Visited once	157	52.9				
	Visited more than once	140	47.1				

Reliability and Validity

This study used 14 items with a sample size of 297, and the overall Cronbach alpha coefficient was calculated to be 0.875. The Cronbach alpha coefficients for items OA1 to OA3 were 0.892, EA1 to EA3 were 0.789, PI1 to PI4 were 0.834, and PD1 to Cronbach alpha coefficient for PD4 was 0.722. Usually, the internal consistency of a scale is considered acceptable when the Cronbach alpha coefficient is more significant than 0.7, and it is considered to have good reliability when it is more significant than 0.8. This indicates that the internal consistency of the questionnaire data is good and that the particular construct under study can be measured more reliably.

The KMO and Bartlett's test results indicated that the data were suitable for factor analysis. The KMO value of 0.821, higher than 0.8, indicated that the data was suitable for factor analysis. Generally, a KMO value above 0.8 indicates suitability for factor analysis, indicating that the correlation between the variables is suitable for extracting the common factor. Bartlett's test of sphericity shows an approximate chi-square value of 2161.662, with a degree of freedom of 91 and a p-value of 0.000, which is significant at a significance level of 0.05 below significant. This result indicates that the correlation matrix is not a unit matrix and rejects the original hypothesis that there is a significant correlation in the data, further supporting the rationale for factor analysis. The KMO and Bartlett's test results indicate that the data are suitable for factor analysis.

Model Fit

TABLE 3
MODEL FIT METRICS

Dimensions	χ2	df	p	χ2/df	GFI	RMSEA	RMR	CFI	NFI	NNFI
Standard of judgment	-	-	>0.05	<3	>0.9	<0.10	<0.05	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9
Mumerical value	165.387	71	0.000	2.329	0.933	0.067	0.067	0.955	0.925	0.943
Other dimensions	TLI	AGFI	IFI	PGFI	PNFI	PCFI	SRMR	RMSEA 90% CI		
Standard of judgment	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	>0.5	>0.5	>0.5	<0.1	-		
Mumerical value	0.943	0.901	0.956	0.631	0.722	0.745	0.077	0.054 ~ 0.080		

Remarks: Default Model, $\chi 2(91) = 2210.030$, $p = 1.000$

The fit of this structural equation model was generally good. First, the chi-square value ($\chi^2 = 165.387$) ratio to the degrees of freedom (df = 71) is 2.329, lower than 3, indicating a good model fit. Although the p-value is 0.000, which is not at a significant level, the chi-square test is susceptible to slight deviations in the case of large samples, so this result is acceptable. The Goodness of Fit Index (GFI = 0.933) and Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI = 0.901) exceeded 0.9, showing excellent model fit. The root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA=0.067) was below 0.1, and the 90% confidence intervals ranged from 0.054 to 0.080, which were within the excellent range, further supporting the model fit.

In addition, the comparative fit index (CFI=0.955), canonical fit index (NFI=0.925), and non-canonical fit index (TLI=0.943) were all above 0.9, indicating the ideal comparative fit goodness of the model. The root mean square residual (RMR=0.067) and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR=0.077) were below 0.1, indicating that the model residuals were small and met the criteria for goodness of fit. Meanwhile, the value-added fit index (IFI=0.956) and the corrected fit index (PGFI=0.631, PNFI=0.722, and

PCFI=0.745) were within the acceptable range, which indicated that the model was relatively concise and valid. Therefore, by combining these fit indices, the model's overall fit is satisfactory, and the model can be considered to reflect the data structure well.

Path Coefficient

TABLE 4
MODEL REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS

X	→	Y	Non-normalized regression coefficients	SE	z (CR)	p	Standardized regression coefficient	Result
Objective Authenticity	→	Place Dependence	0.20	0.027	4.764	0.000	0.716	Support
Objective Authenticity	→	Place Identity	0.511	0.051	10.116	0.000	0.697	Support
Place Dependence	→	Place Identity	0.274	0.266	1.032	0.002	0.681	Support
Existential Authenticity	→	Place Dependence	0.002	0.011	0.223	0.823	0.009	Reject
Existential Authenticity	→	Place Identity	0.230	0.049	4.701	0.000	0.220	Support

Note: → indicates a regression effect relationship or a measurement relationship.

The path coefficients of the model indicate the relationship between the variables and the significance level. First of all, OA has a positive effect on PD, with an unstandardized regression coefficient of 0.131, a standardized regression coefficient of 0.716 and a p-value of 0.000, indicating that the improvement of objective truthfulness significantly enhances the influence of PD. In addition, OA also has a positive effect on PI, with a standardized regression coefficient of 0.697 and a p-value of 0.000, indicating that the effect of OA on PI is also significant. Secondly, PD has a positive effect on PI, with a standardized regression coefficient of 0.681 and a p-value of 0.002, indicating that an increase in PD significantly enhances PI. This indicates that PD is an essential predictor of PI in the model.

Regarding EA, its standardized regression coefficient on PD is 0.009, with a p-value of 0.823, which is insignificant, implying that EA has almost no effect on PD. However, the standardized regression coefficient of EA on PI is 0.220, with a p-value of 0.000, indicating that it has a positive effect on PI, which means that EA can promote PI to a certain extent. The model shows that OA has a positive effect on PD and PI, while PD also affects PI. The OA has a positive effect on both PD and PI, while PD affects PI. On the other hand, EA has a positive effect on PI but has no significant effect on PD.

Analyses of Mediating Effects

This study used the Bootstrap method of the Amos23 software with the aim of verifying whether OA and EA are to influence PI through PD. The sample size was set to 5000 (usually more than 1000 is required), and the confidence level of the interval was set to 95% (usually set to 90%, 95%, and 99%). The bias-corrected confidence interval was used as the criterion, and the upper and lower limits were observed. When the bias-corrected confidence interval for the indirect effect does not include 0, it means that there is an intermediary effect; then, look at the bias-corrected confidence interval for the direct effect; if it does not include 0, it means that the direct effect, and at this time the intermediary effect is partially intermediary; if

it includes 0, it means that the direct effect is not significant, and at this time the intermediary effect is complete intermediary.

TABLE 5
INTERMEDIARY ACTION TEST

Path	symbol	Meaning	Effect	95% CI		SE	p	Result
				lower limit	Upper limit			
Objective Authenticity=>Place Dependence=>Place Identity	a*b	Indirect effect	-0.006	-0.081	0.059	0.036	0.872	Reject
Objective Authenticity=>Place Dependence	a	X=>M	0.48	0.405	0.554	0.038	0	
Place Dependence=>Place Identity	b	M=>Y	-0.012	-0.11	0.086	0.05	0.81	
Objective Authenticity=>Place Identity	c'	Direct effect	0.439	0.36	0.518	0.04	0	
Objective Authenticity=>Place Identity	c	Total effect	0.433	0.369	0.497	0.032	0	

In the path "OA→ PD→ PI" the indirect effect (a*b) is -0.006, with a 95% confidence interval of [-0.081, 0.059], and a p-value of 0.872. Since the confidence interval includes 0, the p-value is not significant, it shows that the indirect effect is not significant. This means that PD does not mediate the effect of OA on PI.

Further analysis of the path "OA→ PD" (a) shows an effect of 0.48, with a 95% confidence interval of [0.405, 0.554] and a p-value of 0.000, indicating that OA significantly increases PD.

in the path "PD→ PI" (b), the effect is -0.012, with a 95% confidence interval of [-0.11, 0.086] and a p-value of 0.81, showing no significant impact of PD on PI.

In the direct path "OA→ PI" (c'), the effect is 0.439, with a 95% confidence interval of [0.36, 0.518] and a p-value of 0.000, indicating a strong positive direct effect of OA on PI.

The total effect (c) is 0.433, with a 95% confidence interval of [0.369, 0.497] and a p-value of 0.000, showing a significant overall effect of OA on PI.

Although OA has a significant direct positive effect on both PD and PI. PD does not significantly affect PI. As a result, the indirect effect of OA on PI through PD is not significant. Therefore, in this model, the effect of OA on PI is mainly direct, without a significant mediating role.

TABLE 6
INTERMEDIARY ACTION TEST

Path	symbol	Meaning	Effect	95% CI		SE	p	Result
				lower limit	Upper limit			
Existential Authenticity=>Place Dependence=>Place Identity	a*b	Indirect effect	0.033	-0.001	0.074	0.019	0.09	Reject
Existential Authenticity=>Place Dependence	a	X=>M	0.113	-0.006	0.233	0.061	0.064	
Place Dependence=>Place Identity	b	M=>Y	0.287	0.197	0.378	0.046	0	
Existential Authenticity=>Place Identity	c'	Direct effect	0.233	0.138	0.329	0.049	0	
Existential Authenticity=>Place Identity	c	Total effect	0.266	0.165	0.367	0.051	0	

In the path "EA→ PD→ PI"(a*b), the indirect effect is 0.033, with a 95% confidence interval of [-0.001, 0.074], and a p-value of 0.09. Although the p-value is close to significant, the confidence interval includes 0, the indirect effect is not significant. This means PD does not play a significant mediating role between EA and PI.

In the path "EA→ PD"(a), shows an effect of 0.113, with a confidence interval of [-0.006, 0.233] and a p-value of 0.064. Again, the confidence interval includes 0, suggesting no significant effect of EA on PD.

In the path "PD→ PI"(b), the effect is 0.287, with a confidence interval of [0.197, 0.378] and a p-value of 0.000, showing a strong positive impact.

In the path "EA→ PI"(c'), the effect is 0.233, with a confidence interval of [0.138, 0.329] and a p-value of 0.000, indicating a significant positive direct effect.

The total effect(c) is 0.266, with a confidence interval of [0.165, 0.367] and a p-value of 0.000, showing an overall significant positive influence of EA on PI.

Although PD strongly impacts PI, its mediating effect between EA and PI is not significant. The main influence comes from the direct effect of EA on PI.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Conclusion

This study contributes in two key ways: first enriches the theoretical and empirical research in the field of PAY, PAT, mountain tourism and tourism management. Based on the existing definitions of the concepts and dimensions of PAY and PAT, this study defines the PAY and PAT of mountain tourists, and their dimensions. Secondly, enhancing the mechanism of intrinsic association between PAY and PAT of mountain tourists. This study supplemented research methods by putting forward seven hypotheses, and constructing a research model. Referring to the existing mature scales, it designed 14 question items to measure OA, EA, PI, PD. Gaoligong Mountain as the case site, 297 valid questionnaires were collected by questionnaire survey method, and were analyzed for reliability and validity by SPSS and AMOS software, and all the indexes met the requirements. Through AMOS to test the hypothetical paths, the indicators reveal:

(1) OA significantly enhances both PD and PI. Research has shown that when tourists perceive the authenticity of an experience, they are more likely to connect with the destination and rely on that place for fulfilment. PD enhances tourists' sense of PI, with higher levels of dependence

leading to a stronger sense of identity. The mediation effect test found that OA and OE do not affect PI through PD. These results are consistent with the findings of previous studies (Kolar and Zabkar 2010; Mlozi, et al. 2012; Wu, et al. 2019; Zhao, et al. 2024).

(2) EA significantly affects PI but does not impact PD, differing from some previous studies (Williams and Vaske 2003; Yi, et al. 2021). Possible reasons for this include the following: firstly, tourists' motivation for travelling may affect their level of attachment to the destination. If tourists' main objective is to seek novelty experiences or short-term leisure, they may not form a long-term dependence on Gaoligong Mountain even if they have a strong emotional identification with the place. Secondly, in the modern tourism environment, tourists have a lot of choices, and even if they like Gaoligong Mountain, they may be more inclined to explore other new destinations rather than fixing their dependence on one place. In addition, tourists' cultural backgrounds and social environments may also influence their place dependence. For example, some cultures place more value on exploration and diversity than on long-term dependence on a particular place.

Implications

The results of the study provide important insights for local government, and tourism enterprises:

First, maintaining and strengthening the perceived authenticity (PAY) of mountain tourism destinations. This can be achieved by promoting the natural, cultural, and historical elements of mountain destinations. Highlighting the unique landscapes, rich biodiversity, and local customs helps showcase the true essence of the place, drawing tourists who seek an authentic connection. Improving tourism infrastructure, such as eco-friendly accommodations, well-designed hiking trails, and efficient transport systems, ensures that visitors have a seamless and sustainable experience. Additionally, offering high-quality guided services that provide in-depth knowledge about the destination's natural environment, history, and culture further enhances the authenticity of the experience. Local guides can share personal stories, folklore, and traditions, fostering deeper connections between tourists and the place. Preserving local culture and natural resources is equally important to maintain authenticity. This can be done by promoting sustainable tourism practices, which include minimizing environmental impact, supporting local communities, and protecting cultural heritage. Creating opportunities for genuine interactions with local communities, traditions, and the environment can strengthen tourists' emotional bond with the destination, encouraging repeat visits and positive word-of-mouth.

Second, targeting the right audience. The highest proportion of participants in mountain tourism is within the 25-34 age group. To appeal to this demographic, marketing strategies should be tailored to meet their interests and needs. Young tourists are typically more adventurous and seek unique, off-the-beaten-path experiences. Therefore, it is important to emphasize aspects of mountain tourism that cater to their desire for adventure, self-discovery, and personal involvement (PI). This could include highlighting activities such as hiking, rock climbing, or cultural immersion experiences, which provide a sense of challenge, excitement, and personal engagement. By focusing on the aspects of mountain tourism that appeal to younger generations, tourism operators can increase their attractiveness and engagement with this key group.

Third, promoting place identity (PI). To strengthen tourists' sense of place identity (PI), it is important to encourage deeper engagement with the environment. Organizing activities like cultural tours allows tourists to learn about local traditions and history, fostering a stronger connection to the place. Biodiversity workshops offer an opportunity for tourists to understand the local ecosystem, encouraging both emotional attachment and environmental awareness. Additionally, nature immersion experiences, such as hiking or bird watching, help tourists feel more connected to the natural surroundings. These activities can create lasting emotional bonds, deepen tourists' sense of belonging, and enhance their overall experience of the destination.

Fourth, understanding tourists' needs. Tailoring tourism products and services based on the needs of different tourist groups will ensure that visitors feel their expectations are met. For example, tourists with higher education levels may be more interested in experiences related to environmental sustainability,

cultural preservation, and community engagement. On the other hand, families or older tourists might prioritize comfort, relaxation, and family-friendly activities. Local governments and mountain tourism developers can gain valuable insights into tourists' characteristics, such as education level, income, and cultural interests, to better design and market tourism experiences that cater to these diverse groups. Personalizing experiences based on these factors will not only improve tourist satisfaction but also build brand loyalty, leading to repeat visits and positive recommendations.

Fifth, policies and planning. Local governments and tourism enterprises should emphasize the importance of preserving the authenticity of natural and cultural resources while enhancing the overall tourist experience. Sustainable tourism policies that prioritize ecological conservation, cultural preservation, and community involvement will help protect the unique identity of mountain destinations. Additionally, the development of regulations and incentives for tourism practices can help ensure that the benefits of tourism are shared with local communities, contributing to the long-term sustainability of the region.

However, this study has certain limitations. First, the sample is restricted to tourists who have visited Gaoligong Mountain, which may not fully reflect the broader tourist population. Future research could conduct surveys in other mountain destinations to verify the cross-regional applicability of the findings. Second, although the questionnaire design was based on established scales, it may still contain subjective biases. Future research could incorporate qualitative methods to further explore tourists' authentic experiences and emotional responses.

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